

Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha's insights and discoveries about human nature, created revolutionary changes in many evolving world views. These were just as significant, if not more-so, than the enormously important discoveries of, say, Copernicus, Galileo or Magellan, eventually leading to the collapse of the then existing world-view created during the period marking Medieval Christian Civilization.

One of the more profound discoveries of the Buddha was, what is known as the Three Marks of Existence. In the ancient Pali language, these are:

- 1) *Annica*
- 2) *Dukkha*
- 3) *Anatta*

Translated, these are 1) *Impermanence*, 2) *Stress/Dissatisfaction/Suffering*, and 3) *Non-Self*.

Everything has some structure, regardless of whether it is an idea, a concept, a philosophy, a house or a tree. Everything has some foundation—an underpinning that supports the “thing.” Contemplating the structure of anything, you will notice that nothing exists independently from anything else. All things, regardless of the form, are dependent on something else. This is known as *Dependent Origination*.

As Theravada monk Nyanaponika Thera states: “The Buddha teaches that life can be correctly understood *only if* these basic facts of existence are understood. And this understanding must take place, not only logically, but in **confrontation** with one's own experience. Insight-wisdom, which is the ultimate liberating factor in Buddhism, consists in just this experiential understanding of the three characteristics as applied to one's own bodily and mental processes, and deepened and matured in meditation.

To see things as they really are means to see them consistently in the light of the three characteristics. Not to see them in this way, or to deceive oneself about their reality and range of application, is the defining mark of ignorance, and ignorance is by itself a potent cause of suffering, knitting the net in which man is caught — the net of false hopes, of unrealistic and harmful desires, of delusive ideologies and of perverted values and aims.¹

Like myself, many have wrestled with the word “existence.” What does this word, used in this context, actually mean? Aside from the marks of existence themselves, I kept focusing on the word “existence.” In context, does it mean to imply, life, living, consciousness—all of these? Although researching the Pali word “thiti,” I was still baffled. I opened a topic at Sangham.net, and asked a friend’s help who is more familiar with the Pali Language. Vijayadhamma Bhikkhu (a Theravada monk presently living in India), commented to me that the three marks of existence Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta are the three “truths” of nature. I began developing a better understanding.

Basically, the Buddha taught that there are three phases in a moment of consciousness. These three phases, in the Pali language, are uppāda (oo-pah-dah), thiti (dhee-tee), bhaṅga (bahn-gha). These three phases represent a topic better saved for another time. However, the three marks are actually three **characteristics** that all conditioned phenomenon share, meaning that everything, every sense experience (sensation), thought, and experience that a human being has, is subject to these three marks (annica, dukkha, and anatta). The three phases of a moment of consciousness are subject to the Three Marks of Existence or, as mentioned earlier, the three “characteristics” of existence.

To make this a bit simpler, in basic terms, one could say that there are three characteristic qualities of experiencing life, and to see them is seeing and

understanding the truth about the nature of reality, which is necessary for awakening at any level—from initial awakening of curiosity all the way to enlightenment (total/complete awakening), and liberation from suffering (nibbana).

Mark No. 1: Annica – Impermanence

With respect to the structure of human existence, the first mark is known as *annica* or **impermanence**, which is not only the basis of the Buddha’s teachings, it has remained the cornerstone that supports his most significant teachings known as the Four Noble Truths², which contains the Eightfold Noble Path of ethical living.

In explaining impermanence, the Buddha taught that everything exists in dependence of something else—a conglomerate of parts if you will. Nothing in existence originates on its own. No matter what form is examined, whether it is air, water, fire, earth, an idea, a thought, a human being or a star, all are comprised of many parts. If one part of something breaks down or changes, the whole structure also breaks down. All of this compounded phenomenon is impermanent because everything breaks down, collapses or disintegrates. Everything has a limited span of existence. Even a granite mountain eventually breaks apart and crumbles to dust—just ask any geologist.

For example, let’s say that you believe something strongly—perhaps such as a child might integrate the belief in some imaginary person, such as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or other fictional character. Once the facts are revealed to the child that these are made-up characters, the original belief dis-integrates. Depending on how intensely the child depends on this belief in connection with

¹ Seeing Things as They Are: Nyanaponika Thera: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/seeingthings.html>

² First Things First: Four Noble Truths: https://zugangzureinsicht.org/html/lib/authors/thanissaro/firstthingsfirst_en.html

happiness, receiving gifts, and so on, determines the child's reaction.

Another example is when a person believes something very strongly and patterns their behavior around the belief to the extent of creating habitual behaviors, which eventually become second-nature. A good example would be the belief that money can solve most, if not all, of life's problems and so habitually pattern their decisions, behaviors, perceptions, likes-dislikes, and so on, around this belief.

Not being accustomed to the absence of money, people with the belief that money can solve most, if not all, of life's problems, suffer greatly. Like the child who may have a deeply emotional dependency on the existence of Santa Claus, the more a person is dependent on money, the greater their suffering when the money is gone or becomes very scarce. The more ingrained this belief is into their lives and thinking, the more intense the suffering. However, when money becomes abundant they might say something like; "And people say that money doesn't bring happiness," or "Tell me that money doesn't bring happiness. Ha!"

The truth regarding the nature of this reality, the reality of money, is that it absolutely does not lead to permanent happiness, permanent security, but only feeds desire, clinging to wrong views and attachment.

It is easy to know when you are depending on something that is impermanent by the level and intensity you suffer when it is gone. You simply need to pay attention to your actions and reactions. It is possible to see when you are dependent on or overly dependent on something that does not actually exist. Money is probably the best example of this. So, being dependent on money, when there is a lack of it and you become distraught, you can point back to the very fact that your suffering is dependent on your being overly reliant on money, and perhaps your wrong views of money.

I once knew a man, a friend actually, who lived a very comfortable life because he made a lot of money. He often spoke of his family's poor

background. He had worked hard for his money, but as the years went by, he did not see how dependent he had become on money.

He always believed and became comfortable with the idea that he would always have money. He did not realize that, over the years, he was living in a bubble, a bubble he created around his entire life; an illusion he simply accepted because of his reliance and dependence on money. Then, the Great Recession of 2007-2008 hit, during which time he lost most of his money because it had been placed in investment accounts that depended heavily upon junk bonds, and company's that invested in too many sub-prime mortgages. Those events caused him much suffering and loss, but he was fortunate enough to realize that the intensity of his suffering was in direct relation to that very bubble that money created in his thinking.

He now lives a much simpler life, and although he is far from being poor, he has learned the value of not being so dependent on money. Suffice-it-to-say, he no longer buys a new car every two years. He drives a previously owned vehicle that serves him well. He takes better care of the vehicle, which at present is 22 years old and continues to run, as he states, "like a Swiss watch." He now understands, from direct experience, that once he recognized the impermanence of everything, the less his dependence on anything impermanent, the happier and more satisfied with life he became.

Conditions, Conditioning & Sankhara

Sankhara is an important Pali word to know. Although many have translated this Pali word into various English-related words, there appears to be only one commonality, which is the word "formations."

Bhikkhu Bodhi states: "The word *sankhara* is derived from the prefix *sam*, meaning "together," joined to the noun *kara*, "doing, making." *Sankharas* are thus "co-doings," things that act in concert with other things, or things that are made by a combination of other things.³"

Therefore, the root meaning of the word *sankhara* is "together-making." Things put together make something else. In the Pali texts, the Buddha used the word *sankhara* mostly in relation to "conditioning" or referring to the "conditioned" nature of things. Recognizing the conditioned nature of everything is a big part of the awakening process, and central to enlightenment.

On his deathbed, the Buddha uttered the following last words:

*"Dhamma sankhara, appamadena
samпадetha."⁴*

Meaning: "Transient (changing/impermanence) are all component things. Work out your deliverance with heedfulness!"

Translators generally agree that the phrase, "all component things," refers to the conditioning of everything.

According to most English language dictionaries, the current meaning of the word "conditioned" is as follows:

- 1) "Subject to or dependent on a condition or conditions."⁵
- 2) "1: brought or put into a specified state; 2: determined or established by conditioning."⁶
- 3) "expressing the idea that one thing depends on another thing"⁷

Part of the supporting structure of recognizing the three marks of existence is to understand that

everything is impermanent due to the truth about the nature of the conditioning of all things. Everything is conditioned in order to come into existence.

Appamadena

Another very significant word used by the Buddha on his deathbed was the word *appamadena*, and literally means "incessant heedfulness." Heedfulness means being vigilant, watchful, and mindful. However, the Buddha also taught that it was not possible for a person to be heedful of one's actions, behaviors, beliefs, and so on, unless they had achieved some level of awakening. Awakening does not come as a big flash moment for most. Awakening, like learning the Dhamma, is a process, a process of examining our views, beliefs, opinions, intentions and reactions to those things that we learn about ourselves.

One must therefore practice to become aware in every moment of life. For it is only when someone is aware that awakening begins. Being fully aware of one's actions leads to being fully awake and mindful of everything going on in their lives. Being aware does not mean merely acknowledging your actions, but seeing why you do what you do, and experience what you experience. Only when this becomes an individual's natural state can true good from bad, right from wrong be distinguished. Being aware of what is truly good from bad, right from wrong, and so on, requires that the individual is free from rationalizations. When awareness leads to an awakened state of mind one sees and understands the dependent elements of the loveliness or malice of one's actions.

³ Sankhara: Bodhi: https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_43.html

⁴ Dhamma sankhara, appamandena sampadetha: <https://accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/piyadassi/wheel001.html>

⁵ Conditioned 1: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/conditioned>

⁶ Conditioned 2: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conditioned>

⁷ Conditioned 3: Conditional: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conditional>

While *appamadena* denotes incessant heedfulness, the word *appamada* is used throughout the Pali texts to denote mindfulness (*sati*). Opposite to mindfulness is called *pamada* in the texts. Recorded in the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha said the following, with regard to appamada and pamada:

“Monks, I know not of any other single thing of such power to cause the arising of good thoughts if not yet arisen, or to cause the waning of evil thoughts if already arisen, as heedfulness. In him who is heedful, good thoughts not yet arisen, do arise, and evil thoughts, if arisen, do wane⁸.”

“Mindfulness, I declare is essential in all things everywhere. It is as salt is to the curry.”

Constant mindfulness and vigilance are necessary to avoid the things that ensnare us in order to reverse the effects of doing and thinking things that are not beneficial or wholesome. Watching our reactions and subsequent actions is the key. A person with presence of mind, who surrounds themselves with watchfulness of mind (*satima*); the person of courage and earnestness, gets ahead of the lazy, the heedless (*pamatto*), as a thoroughbred outperforms an old plow horse. The importance of *sati*, mindfulness, in all our dealings is clearly indicated by the teachings of the Buddha with regard to something called *samsara* in the Pali texts.

Samsara

Samsara; the meaning of which is the endless cycle of birth and death. The literal translation from the Pali is “wandering-on.” The concept of *samsara* is not limited to just Buddhism. Many cultures around the world employ the same word with the same meaning. The Buddha taught that it is the attempt to deny the reality of *samsara*

(the cycle of birth and death) that causes the cycle of suffering, birth, and death.

In many respects, *samsara* is proof of the Three Marks of Existence or, as said earlier, the three characteristics of everything that is impermanent.



Samsara is a process, and as Thanissaro Bhikkhu states samsara is:

“The tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, you create another one and go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds, too.⁹”

With each new round of birth, we build yet another world, which interacts with the world of others. Now, not that we never experience any joy out of our various rounds of rebirth, of course we do, however, the elements of the Three Marks of Existence are always present: *annica*, *dukkha*, *anatta* (impermanence, stress, dissatisfaction, suffering, and the illusion of self).

Mark No. 2: Dukkha – Dissatisfaction/Suffering

In his first teaching, known as the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha employed the concept of *dukkha*. *Dukkha*—simply put, means anything that causes dissatisfaction, stress, unease, and so on, which is responsible for human suffering. He taught that as long as we continue to struggle to maintain some sense of a self, life will manifest with stress and fear.

⁸ Sathipathana Sutta: Apamada, pamada: <https://accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/piyadassi/wheel001.pdf>

⁹ Samsara: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/samsara.html>

This struggle for pinning down a self will forever be unsuccessful because of ego clinging. We become attached to this idea of who and what we think we are.

Of all of the important Pali words, none is as poignant nor misunderstood as that of *dukkha*. Although translators have attempted to understand the scope of the meaning of this word, the only way in which anyone has been able to come close to a clear understanding, is to examine the word in the context in which it is used in the original Pali texts.

However, there is no single English word that adequately captures the full scope of the subtlety of this word.

Throughout many centuries' translators have used words such as dissatisfaction, stress, un-satisfactoriness, and of course suffering to describe the word *dukkha*. Each of these words has a value in association with the context in which they are used. However, caution is recommended that one does not allow themselves to accept any single translation. The reason for this is because the entire point of practicing the Dhamma is to widen the understanding and direct experience of *dukkha* for the purpose of exposing it, and subsequently eliminating it permanently.

Recorded in the Samyutta Nikaya (SN 56.11), the Buddha stated that:

“Birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, & despair are *dukkha*; association with the unbeloved is *dukkha*; separation from the loved is *dukkha*; not

getting what is wanted is *dukkha*. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are *dukkha*.¹⁰”

The Venerable Sariputta¹¹, one of the Buddha's chief students, was an arahant¹² who elaborated on the Buddha's teaching of *dukkha*. His commentary is recorded in the Saccavibhanga Sutta¹³:

“Now what, friends, is the noble truth of stress? Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

And what is birth? Whatever birth, taking birth, descent, coming-to-be, coming-forth, appearance of aggregates, & acquisition of [sense] spheres of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called birth.

And what is aging? Whatever aging, decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, decline of life-force, weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging.

And what is death? Whatever deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, completion of time, breakup of the aggregates, casting off of the body, interruption in the life faculty of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called death.

And what is sorrow? Whatever sorrow, sorrowing, sadness, inward sorrow, inward sadness of anyone suffering from misfortune, touched by a painful thing, that is called sorrow.

¹⁰ Samyutta Nikaya 56.11: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html>

¹¹ Sariputta: <https://accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel090.html>

¹² Arahant: <https://accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/arahantsbodhisattvas.html>

¹³ Saccavibhanga Sutta: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.141.than.html>

And what is lamentation? weeping, crying, howling? Whatever crying, grieving, lamenting, weeping, wailing, lamentation of anyone suffering from misfortune, touched by a painful thing, that is called lamentation.

And what is pain? Whatever is experienced as bodily pain, bodily discomfort, pain or discomfort born of bodily contact, that is called pain.

And what is distress? Whatever is experienced as mental pain, mental discomfort, pain or discomfort born of mental contact, that is called distress.

And what is despair? Whatever despair, despondency, desperation of anyone suffering from misfortune, touched by a painful thing, that is called despair.

And what is the stress of not getting what is wanted? In beings subject to birth, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to birth, and may birth not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wanting. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted. In beings subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, and may aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wanting. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted.

And what are the five clinging-aggregates that, in short, are stressful? The clinging-aggregate of form, the clinging-aggregate of feeling, the clinging-aggregate of perception, the clinging-aggregate of fabrications, the clinging-

aggregate of consciousness: These are called the five clinging-aggregates that, in short, are stressful.

This, friends, is called the noble truth of stress."

A more contemporary rendition of dukkha, expands on the meaning of the word within the context of the way the word is used in the Suttas¹⁴ is as follows:

- Disturbance
- Irritation
- Dejection
- Worry
- Despair
- Fear
- Dread
- Anguish
- Anxiety
- Vulnerability
- Injury
- Inability
- Inferiority
- Sickness
- Aging
- Decay of body and faculties
- Senility
- Pain/pleasure
- Excitement/boredom
- Deprivation/excess
- Desire/frustration
- Suppression
- Longing/aimlessness
- Hope/hopelessness
- Effort, activity, striving/repression
- Loss
- Want
- Insufficiency/satiety
- Love/love-lessness
- Friendlessness/loneliness
- Dislike

¹⁴ Francis Story in Suffering, in Vol. II of The Three Basic Facts of Existence (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1983)

- Aversion/atraction
- Parenthood/childlessness
- Submission/rebellion
- Decision/indecisiveness
- Vacillation, uncertainty

Noble Truths

Recorded in the Samyutta Nikaya (61.11)¹⁵, the Buddha was spending time in the city of Varanasi¹⁶ where he was speaking to five monks. Whenever the Buddha spoke of something referring to the truth about the nature of a particular reality, he used the term “noble.” However, the meaning of the word noble in which the Buddha used it has a much deeper connotation.

Throughout the Ages, many have wondered and asked why the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path are called “noble.”

This question was contemplated by Buddhaghosa¹⁷, a monk living during the 5th century CE (our common era), and whose name means “voice of the Buddha.”. His explanation encompassed a four-fold answer because of the various contexts in which the word was used by the Buddha.

In brief, Buddhaghosa did not ask why the Noble Truths were called Noble. Rather, he expounded on the meaning of the word Noble with respect to why the Truths were called “noble.” The Pali word referenced as meaning “noble” is *ariyasacca* (*Ah-ree-yah-sahk-ab-nee*).

In his commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya, Buddhaghosa gave two explanations¹⁸:

ariyabhavakarani

ariyapatividdhani va saccani

Meaning that the truths which cause nobleness or are penetrated by the noble one[s].

In his lengthy treatment of the subject in that text he quotes the Suttas when referring to the context in which the word *ariyasacca* is used:

“ariyasacca ti vuccanti” "Because noble ones, the Buddhas, etc., penetrate them, therefore they are called 'the noble one's' truths".

“Moreover, they are the truths of the Noble One, 'the Noble One's (=the Buddha's)”

"Because of the attainment of nobleness arising from their discovery", "the ennobling truths."

“The noble truths”. They are also called *ariyani* because they are *tathani*: true, not untrue, not uncertain, although, since this explanation is that given elsewhere for *sacca*, this would seem rather to be the reason why they are called truths". The result, then, is a tautology "the true truths."

¹⁵ Samyutta Nikaya 61.11: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html>

¹⁶ Varanasi, India: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varanasi>

¹⁷ Buddhaghosa: <https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Buddhaghosa>

¹⁸ Buddhaghosa Commentary-Noble Truths: [http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Articles/Why are the Four Noble Truths Called Noble_Norman PTS_2008.pdf](http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Articles/Why%20are%20the%20Four%20Noble%20Truths%20Called%20Noble%20_Norman%20 PTS%202008.pdf)

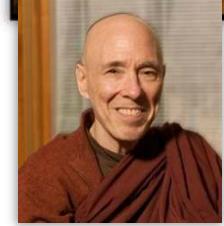
Mark No. 3: Anatta / Non-self

Enter the third element of the Three Marks of Existence—is non-self (*anatta*). Why do you suppose that, perhaps even reading this, the possibility that there is no self seems somehow disconcerting—perhaps even frightening? This is because most persons are utterly attached to this idea; this concept, that there really is a self—a solid, single self that is somehow separate. This concept, and for some, a belief, causes suffering because many people live their entire lives in a state of hoping that they will somehow survive their deaths with everything about their “self” still intact.

However, the first of the Three Marks of Existence is applicable here as well, because the body is impermanent and is merely a product of a multitude of causes and conditioning. Where is the self? Can the self be identified by any means? One way to consider these things is that impermanence (*annica*) describes how things actually are, while non-self (*anatta*) describes what things are not.

In the Pali language, these Three Existences are also known as the “Three Characteristics” (*ti-lakkha.na*) or at times, the General Characteristics (saama-na-lakkha-na). However, *annica* is generally accepted as the basis for the other two characteristics of existence. The second and third characteristics of existence, and *anatta*, the third of the three characteristics, is often times founded on suffering (*dukkha*) alone.

Nyanaponika Thera¹⁹, a Sri-Lanka-ordained Theravada monk, and co-founder of the Buddhist Publication Society, as-well-as a prolific writer and contemporary author of numerous seminal Theravada books, was also the teacher of the contemporary and well-known Buddhist monk, Bhikkhu Bodhi²⁰.



Nyanaponika wrote the following regarding the Three Marks of Existence:

*“If we contemplate even a minute sector of the vast range of life, we are faced with such a tremendous variety of life’s manifestations that it defeats description. And yet three basic statements can be made that are valid for all animate existence, from the microbe up to the creative mind of a human genius. These features common to all life were first found and formulated over 2500 years ago by the Buddha, who was rightly called “Knower of the Worlds” (*loka-vidu*). They are the Three Characteristics (*ti-lakkha.na*) of all that is conditioned, i.e., dependently arisen. In English renderings, they are also sometimes called Signs, *Signata*, or Marks.”*

¹⁹ Nyanaponika Thera- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyanaponika_Thera

²⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi-https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhikkhu_Bodhi

Caution

The Buddha' did not specifically teach anything regarding the self, rather he taught anatta, which specifically refers to non-self. The teaching of *anatta* or non-self, has been a hot topic since the time of the Buddha, and likely before his time as well.

The caution to the reader, particularly readers from Western cultures, is to be mindful of not allowing the influences of other philosophical or more directly, theosophical (religious) concepts to creep in, namely those concepts common to Christian teachings. Why? Because these teachings are in every way diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Buddha, and in fact, prevents people from having a real understanding and knowledge of the profound things learned by the Buddha.

Anatta focuses on ego-lessness because of the Buddha's teachings with regard to the impersonality of existence. What is thought to be the self, e.g., the ego, is a phenomenon of existence, and nothing more. In his search for the truth about the nature of reality, the Buddha discovered the best path to awakening and this path became known as the Middle Way. With regard to anatta, ego-lessness; the middle way defines an understanding of self that is between two extremes.

On one side of this extreme is the spiritualistic doctrine of an eternal ego-entity, or soul, which somehow survives death. The other extreme is a more materialistic belief that there is

a temporary ego-self that is entirely annihilated upon death.

While reading this, do you feel a certain angst within you; a kind of shadow feeling lurking in the background? You really don't like considering that there really is no "self," no me. Why does this concept create such discomfort?

Because we have invested a great deal, our entire lives; our thinking; our perceptions— everything, into this idea that "I" am whole; a thing; an entity. After all, I think; I act; I experience. Who else contains all that is me? What else contains all that is me?

Without a doubt, it is the Buddha's realization that there is no actual "self," which represents his most profound teaching. But, since we believe that we live in a material—solid—world, this concept of "no self" is really difficult to wrap our heads around.

So, while reading the following paragraphs, try not to divide what you experience by conceptual thinking or comparing your beliefs to what you are reading. Simply read and be aware of the experience of what you are reading without judgement or comparison. The following paragraphs represent the Buddha's most profound insight and this will be disturbing to many. By way of suggestion, read the following with a sense of detachment, in the position of; "What if this is true?" In other words, the reader should not accept the following as true, but merely, what if it is true? This will help to keep your thinking open.

Where It All Began

During the time that the Buddha lived, there raged a controversy; a very heated controversy among religious and secular philosophers. Two main schools of thought regarding the existence of the self vehemently argued their side of the case, creating a lot of confusion and alternative views regarding the “self.” These positions grew out of humankind’s curiosity about what a human being is, what happens when we die, and what was the ultimate purpose of a human being.

Eventually, there were only three viewpoints—three opinions—three beliefs that evolved out of this philosophical conflagration. One represents the philosophy that there is an eternal ego-entity that outlasts death. Throughout the Ages this eternal ego-entity came to be called a “soul.” This eternal soul-theory, evolved into the basis for the Christian religious philosophy. From the Buddha’s time, right up to this day, this position is known as Eternalist Philosophy. To get an idea of the length that philosophers will go to attempt to explain the “eternalist” philosophy, take a look at the Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry²¹.

Next, comes another school that taught that the “self” was only a temporary ego-entity, which is annihilated at death. This group became known as Nihilists, which remains just as strong today as it did in the Buddha’s time. The Tipitaka, which are the three main records of the Buddha’s teachings, originally written in Pali, refers to nihilism as ‘natthikavāda’ and the nihilist view as ‘micchāditthi’. Various suttas

within the Tipitaka describe a multiplicity of views held by different sects of ascetics while the Buddha was alive, some of which were viewed by him to be morally nihilistic. In the Doctrine of Nihilism in the Apannaka Sutta, the Buddha describes moral nihilists as holding the following views:

- Giving produces no beneficial results
- Good and bad actions produce no results
- After death, beings are not reborn into the present world or into another world
- There is no one in the world who, through direct knowledge, can confirm that beings are reborn into this world or into another world

Buddha then states that those who hold these views will not see the danger in misconduct and the blessings in good conduct and will, therefore, avoid good bodily, verbal and mental conduct; practicing misconduct instead²².

This second school of thought evolved throughout the Ages to become known as the Materialist Philosophy, which fueled much of humankind’s search for an answer to material existence.

Then comes the Buddha, the third philosophy, which teaches neither an eternal, nor a temporary ego-entity. Rather, Buddha teaches that, what became commonly referred to as ego, self, soul, personality, and so on, is conventional terminology that refers to any real, independent, entity. Basically, that the idea of a self is merely a concept based on aggregates (parts).

²¹ Eternalism: Standford Edu: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/eternity/>

²² Buddha & Nihilism: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihilism>

Rather, Buddha discovered that life was not either of the extremes of the nihilist view or the materialist view, but that the concept of self is a result of a psychophysical process of existence that is in constant change or flux, as it were. In other words, the self was merely an aggregate phenomenon based on the ability to experience.

This is why the Buddha said that without a real understanding of the egolessness of existence, it would be impossible to achieve any understanding of the Dhamma. In other words, without the understanding of egolessness, it would not be possible to attain liberation from dukkha (stress and suffering). Liberation, as the Buddha experienced, would not be possible. Grasping the goal of freeing the mind from attachments to the ego is absolutely necessary to attain this liberation (nibanna/nirvana).

It is this teaching of the egolessness of existence that forms the essence of the Buddha's explanation, found in the Samyutta Nikaya (22.86):

“Both formerly and now, Anuradha, it's only stress (dukkha) that I describe, and the cessation of stress (dukkha).”

The entire foundation and structure of the Buddha's teachings rests on his explanation of *anatta* (egolessness). Without the teaching of *anatta*, there would be no Buddha, no Dhamma. Of course, the Buddha used conventional language, referring to himself as “I,” persons, or living beings. However, his use of conventional language such as this should not be misconstrued to imply that the Buddha, in fact, believed in a separate ego-entity.

An Example of Non-Self or Egolessness

For this example, let's try to set aside the Freudian concept of ego for a moment. Now, clear your mind a bit—get ready to explore. Think of your possessions, any particular possession will do. Let's say your car or your cell phone. Your car belongs to you, right? You are in control of it. You can drive it anywhere you want and you can drive it however you want. You are in control because the car is yours and you have power over it. Okay so far?

Now, do you have power over yourself? Can you make your height taller or shorter? Can you change the length of your limbs at will? No. At one time your body was very small, and very fragile. Now you are larger, stronger, and have learned a lot of things. Did you will this body-change to happen?

Ultimately control of your body is limited. Just like your car; your cell phone and the trees you pass on the streets—all are subject to decay, breakdown and eventually death of one sort or another. Everything follows the laws of nature, including you. So then, if you have no real power over what happens to your body do you really own yourself, like a possession, like a car or a cell phone? Are you really in control of this ego-centered being?

But wait, what about feelings? If you own yourself, and you have power and control of your feelings, why are you unhappy; why do you get sad; why do you have fear? Could you not simply control this possession you call “me,” simply willing this self to be happy; unfearful; glad and joyful? No? Why not?

From what we have learned, in order to be conscious, we need a body that includes the senses in order to experience consciousness. So then, consciousness is dependent on the senses. So then, do the senses cause you to be a self? What happens if you lose your sense of hearing? Does this mean you are no longer conscious? No one can control the senses. If that were true, you could simply shut off your sight, hearing, sense of touch or smell. If your body is you, and you believe you own and possess this body, then why do you not have control over it? The answer is, because there is no self to control. All of our thoughts, all of our sensory input, thinking, and so on; every aspect of the human being is an aggregate of experiences, parts and pieces, none of which is permanent nor indestructible. There is only a “me” or an “I” in terms of conventional language—that’s all.

Here is where the Buddha’s teaching really gets interesting, and where one’s conventional understanding comes into question. The same conventional ideas of “self” and “no-self,” materialism and nihilism continue to be debated to this day. Humans are still asking the same questions: “What does it mean to be a human being?” “Why are we here?” “What is my purpose?” “Where are we going?” “How did everything come to be?” And this is the human dilemma. The same dilemma that the Buddha focused on, which was the confusion that this dilemma causes, and which causes all human suffering. The Buddha understood the sheer agony of being intelligent enough to ask these sorts of questions with no real answer in sight.

Excavating a little deeper, we can contemplate that if we believe in an eternal “self,” with a soul, then we are most certainly the center of reality; we **are** the reality. But, this does not give us any more solace or comfort

either. Consider that if one believes in the eternal self with a soul, then we must have existed before everything else came into being. This would mean that we could be the cause of all creation.

If we believe that there is no self, then we buy into another extreme and cannot find an answer to the most obvious question: “Then who is it that is reading this?” “Who is it that is experiencing this life?” If everything, as the physicists claim, is nothing more than matter and energy, then where does perception and consciousness come from? You see, there has been no answers to these questions until the Buddha. This was the exact problem that the Buddha set out to explain. Without question, nearly 2,600 years of proof has shown that the Buddha destroyed these questions.

The Middle Way

Buddha’s discovery resolved the question of existence. While Buddha never said “yes” or “no,” he also did not say, “I don’t know.” He understood that agreeing or disagreeing to the question of “self” or “no-self” meant supporting one or the other extremes. There had to be a middle path and it was not “I don’t know,” because he did know. How did he know? The Buddha understood that he already knew. He understood that we all know; we are just not adept at recognizing this knowledge, and that this knowing was buried beneath the concept of a self.

He arrived at this conclusion because he realized that it was his direct experience alone that caused him to discover that there was no evidence whatsoever of a beginning or an end, neither could he find any evidence of a separate, independent anything, that could have a beginning or an end.

This discovery led him to understand that the materialist's viewpoint was extreme. So too, was his understanding that the nihilists view could not be correct because it did not account for the experience of consciousness. These views, just as they were then, and are now, are what the Buddha considered to be extremes; static views that merely attempt to envelop or wrap reality into some nice explainable package. The truth, which the Buddha discovered, is that none of these views was able to explain the truth about the nature of reality. The concept of an eternal self, did not explain the nature of reality, and neither did the concept of no-self.

This is where conventional language or what I call “consensus” language, stunts our ability to see the truth about the nature of reality. Words such as Buddhism, Buddhist, truth, love, nature, and so on, become frozen into mere concepts, devoid of any truth about the nature of reality. Conceptual meanings attempt to define reality and freeze it, if you will, into something definite, hard, predictable, solid, pre-packaged and simple. But, this robs humankind of the ability to see beyond the concepts and blocks the truth about the nature of reality.

If you are considered by consensus to be Buddhist, then you are this or that, pre-defined. It is the same with the word Buddhism, which has become a pre-defined concept of what Buddhism is and what it represents.

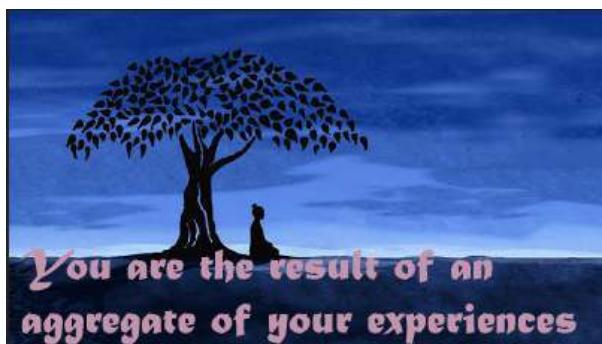
It is very easy, particularly more so in our Age of Information, to become caught up in conceptual thinking; conceptual language; consensus language or consensus speak, as I call it. This becomes so ubiquitous to us that we fail to realize or fail to appreciate that this way of thinking imprisons us into specific, frozen views, blocking us from expanding our

views. We believe these concepts; we rely on these concepts, and we make our decisions based on these concepts, but the Buddha rejected all such conceptual thinking; all such views. Why? Because anything; any thinking; any view that attempted to freeze the world of experience or isolate experiences into concepts; such as self, not-self, evil, goodness, and so on, limited a person's understanding of true reality. The Buddha understood that reality could not be compressed into concepts. The only thing that mattered was that the truth about the nature of reality could only be found through understanding direct experience of the condition of existence—dukkha (suffering).

To put it another way; Buddha realized, through his own direct experience, that suffering (dukkha), dissatisfaction, etc., results from our ignorance that all things are completely empty of self. He understood that it was the human proclivity (tendency) to think, act, believe and hope that there is a self, and it is this thinking that causes the greatest suffering. Why? The bottom-line is that he understood that to believe in a self, was to defy the truth about the nature of reality.

Oh, how we long for something permanent, something solid, some firm ground on which to stand. We even want our experiences to be something lasting, something solid, unless of course the experience is something we are averse to or causes us displeasure. But, even this is in a constant state of change. Where can we find ground—solidity?

So then, what is the self? If there is no self or non-self, which the Buddha also rejected, then what is left? Who are we? Who am I? The answer:



Direct experience. There is no single entity of self. Your thoughts are not your “self.” Your feelings are not your “self.” Taste, touch, hearing and all of the direct experiences that you have, is not a self.

Yes, this is a difficult thing to wrap your thinking around, but there is no single thing that can provide proof of the existence of a self. We collect all of our direct experiences, put them into a nice little package and call it “me.” But, none of those experiences, individually, are “you;” are a “me;” are a “self.”

Buddha Nature

This is a phrase that has gained some popularity over the years since the Dhamma has entered Western cultures, and because of its popularity, the phrase has become conceptualized—frozen—static, as it were. Buddha nature is our ability to see the truth about the nature of reality. All human beings have it, if you could call it an it. The Buddha said that the truth about reality is perceived by right wisdom.

The innate nature of the human being is to want to know truth; to desire to know what is real from what is not. The ability to see what is not covered by ignorance is Buddha nature, and it is available to all human beings.

I'll try and make this more understandable. Let's try envisioning a human life to a stream of beautiful music. The direct experience of the music only ends when the musical score ends. Music forms a coherent (most of the time) stream of sound. You experience the music as long as you can hear it. As long as the music keeps going, you experience, directly, the stream of music. Human life is like that; a constant stream of changes in pitch, speed, tempo, and so on, until it ends. But, while the music is playing you are directly connected to the experience. You can only control the volume of the music, you cannot change the music or the composition. You can only experience life as long as the stream of experience exists. Therefore, you have the Three Marks of Existence. Do you see?

We don't see things the way they are.
We see them the way WE are.

ME SIG.

The problem comes when we don't see things the way they are. We see them the way we believe we are; or that we think we are, based on conceptual language, and consensual meanings. This is ignorance.

At the core of the Buddha's teachings is that all sentient beings suffer. Humans, are of course sentient beings. A sentient being is any being with consciousness or in some contexts, simply beings that have life or are alive. Unfortunately, this description leaves out Mr. Data (Star Trek Next Generation) as a sentient being.

According to the Buddha, sentient beings are composed of the five aggregates: matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha is recorded as saying that "just as the word 'chariot' exists on the basis of the aggregate of its parts, the concept of 'being' exists when the five aggregates are available.²³"

Sentience principally refers to beings in contrast with Buddhahood—meaning that, sentient beings are not enlightened beings because a sentient being is constricted by samsara—the cycle of death, rebirth and suffering (*dukkha*).

What is Meant by Existence?

In context, regarding human beings: this means alive; possessing the five aggregates, therefore, sentience—consciousness. As sentient beings we experience suffering, not for the reason that there is anything inherently wrong with humans, but merely because we harbor gross misunderstandings about the nature of reality. The goal of the Buddha's teachings was to teach people an effective way to end suffering. Part of what is necessary for successfully ending one's suffering is to; and *there is no other way to say this*; opening the mind (not the brain) to new ideas, without clinging to old ideas, old habits, old concepts, and old beliefs, which are centered more on social, familiar and religious consensus rather than truth. Knowing the difference results in a clearer understanding of the truth about the nature of reality.

Understanding the truth about the nature of reality can only be understood if the three basic facts of the Three Marks of Existence are grasped; and not merely grasped logically or

intellectually, but through conflict with one's own experiences.

What does "conflict through one's own experience mean?" Every human being is unique, in that no two person's experiences are identical. Every human being takes something different from the same experiences and reacts in unique ways. No two persons share identical kamma (karma). Every single human being, carries a unique mind (consciousness), which is the result of a person's actions (kamma/karma).

This consciousness or perhaps it is better said; each person's stream of consciousness is, what I call, the secret witness; the karmic imprint. This secret witness (stream of consciousness) knows everything about you; all of your secret thoughts, desires, cravings, opinions, actions, and moreover your true intentions.

No human being can escape this stream of consciousness because it is this consciousness that contains all of a person's cumulative actions (kamma/karma) ever produced. Having this insight—accepting and trusting in this knowledge, is wisdom, and causes wisdom. This insight is what is known as *vipassana*, which is the ultimate liberating factor in Buddhism, and consists of this experience of the three characteristics applied to one's own bodily and mental processes, which is deepened and matured through the practice of *vipassana* meditation.

Seeing Things as They Really Are

What, exactly, does this mean? Generally, people see almost everything through a filter. In most cases that filter is nothing more than seeing things as you accept them. However, seeing things with discerning wisdom means

²³ Samyutta Nikaya 5.10

seeing things consistently through understanding the three characteristics; the Three Marks of Existence; as they really are.

Ignorance of these three characteristics of existence is none other than self-deception. Most people do not, will not, or simply cannot acknowledge their own self-deception, because self-deception is almost always masked by incorrect perceptions and attached to the ego. This is a very potent cause for suffering.

An example of self-deception and wrong perceptions are false hopes. Hopes are nothing more than wishing. Wishing creates unrealistic, and sometimes, harmful desires, and false ideologies. These sorts of perceptions create beliefs and opinions, which in turn create incorrect values and distorted goals, in which people become caught.

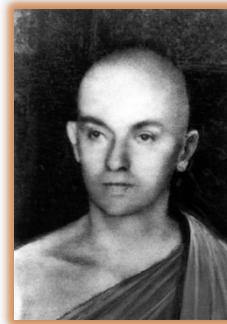
What is the result of this kind of falsehood? Suffering, stress, frustration, repeated disappointments, despair, and the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth and death).

You might be thinking at this moment' "This is depressing!" But, this is the truth. Why should this cause one to feel depressed? Once a child grows into adulthood, he/she has absorbed and filtered through those things considered pleasant or unpleasant and created a, sometimes impregnable shield of beliefs, habits, opinions, likes and dislikes.

Of course, hearing such things will feel uncomfortable. By the time a child has reached adulthood a personal bubble has been created. We all live within our own self-created bubbles. The bubble protects us, sometimes from looking at, considering or opening our minds to something different—something real. Most persons today do not want to see themselves as they really are. Why should they? Are they not comfortable in the bubbles they determine to be their lives? As Pema

Chodron calls this—*our story line*. We invest a great deal in our story lines, and spend our lives creating them.

Well, now you may be thinking that I sound like a nihilist (radical) or a skeptic—a real sad sacks! Can you imagine what the Buddha must have faced in his time? People alive during that time, who had the opportunity to hear the Buddha's teachings were no more thrilled to hear that their lives were riddled with ignorance than we are.



(25 June 1905 -
8 March 1960)

Nanimoli Bhikkhu²⁴

a British Theravada Buddhist monk once said;
"Whatever is will be was."

Perceiving impermanence, the Buddha said:

"The perceiving of impermanence, bhikkhus, developed and frequently practiced, removes all sensual passion, removes all passion for material existence, removes all passion for becoming, removes all ignorance, removes and abolishes all conceit of "I am." Just as in the autumn a farmer, plowing with a large plow, cuts through all the spreading rootlets as he plows; in the same way, bhikkhus, the perceiving of impermanence, developed and frequently practiced, removes all sensual passion... removes and abolishes all conceit of "I am."²⁵"

²⁴ Nanimoli Bhikkhu-https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ñāṇamoli_Bhikkhu

²⁵ Samyutta Nikaya 22.102

Contemplating and perceiving this idea of impermanence is the key that unlocks the ability to practice. Why? Because, for the simple reason that you begin to really see things as they actually are.

Once you realize that everything is impermanent, the passion for the material begins to shrink. As the Buddha stated, the removal of ignorance abolishes all those attachments to “I,” “me,” and “mine.” The human tendency toward feeding our own self-ideation begins to decrease.

This does not mean that you become lost and without a sense of being. That is not possible because you are a sentient being, and, as mentioned earlier in this essay, sentience means consciousness. However, once the ideation of me, mine, and I, begin to loosen its grip, the consciousness that is truly you (your Buddha nature-if you will), has an opportunity to emerge.

In other words, you begin to see things as they really are, not just seeing things we want to see; how we want to see them; how we need to see them, in order to feel right, safe, part of the herd; accepting the doctrines of the consensus of the times.

“The five aggregates, monks, are annica, impermanent; whatever is impermanent, that is dukkha, unsatisfactory; whatever is dukkha, that is without attaa, self. What is without self, that is not mine, that I am not, that is not myself. Thus, should it be seen by perfect wisdom, as it really is. Who sees by perfect wisdom, as it really is, his mind, not grasping, is detached from defects; he is liberated.²⁶”

The proof that there is a part of your reality that can be called your Buddha-nature is the fact that you are able to understand what is being said in this article. This is proof that you understand reality and the truth about the nature of reality. Otherwise, how could you have any hope of awakening? The only

difference between you and a Buddha is that an ordinary person (what the Buddha called run-of-the-mill person), is not awake. A Buddha is a person that is awake. The difference between you and a Buddha (an awakened one) is not in how you perceive things, but rather what your concepts are. A Buddha is not frozen by perceptions that are dependent on static concepts. A Buddha’s experiences are free from conceptual thinking—frozen ideas, frozen beliefs, frozen opinions. All of these, the ordinary person uses to explain their experiences.

When listening to music you do not need to explain each change in tempo, beat, resonance, meter and so on. You do not need to define the music with concepts; you simply experience the whole stream of the score in a single experience. Seeing experience in this way is the beginning of liberation from suffering.

To divide experience into concepts is damning oneself to the constraint of ignorance. We, without knowing we are doing it, build ourselves these neat little frameworks based on conceptional thinking, labels, values, meanings, definitions, and so on. Whenever a person who is a buddha (someone that is awake), conceptualizes, they realize what they are doing, but are not “attached” to it. To say that conceptualization IS the problem, is like saying that food is the problem for a binge-eater. Conceptualization is not the issue here, rather it is becoming attached to the concept. It is the same for the addict of any substance. The substance does not have a self, an identity

²⁶ Samyutta Nikaya: SN 22.45

or consciousness—it is a thing. It can have no influence whatsoever. However, becoming attached to the substance, the idea or concept that the substance is addictive is the real root source of the problem. Therefore, an awakened individual can have concepts the same as anyone else, but they are aware of the difference between what they actually see and what they think. This is what the Buddha referred to as “right wisdom.” The source of the wisdom is reality not concept.

So, you are like a stream of music, flowing along. Consciousness is the stream and all of the direct experiences you are aware of are a part of that stream. As long as the stream moves along, you experience consciousness.

The buddha person understands that consciousness is merely creating divisions; distinctions in the stream. Consciousness divides and splits up what is actually a connected whole into component parts. This happens through our senses. A sound doesn’t smell, a smell doesn’t sound, a feeling doesn’t sound, seeing doesn’t feel, and so on. It is because of our senses that we mistakenly believe that we are separate, and everything else is outside of us. The whole Universe is “out there” somewhere.

So, yes, we conceptualize in order to understand and find some familiarity—some ground that we can depend upon. What the Dhamma does is give coherence to what we think is “out there,” so that we can see the truth about the nature of reality.

From time immemorial, human beings have re-packaged all of our beliefs, and

thoughts, about the phenomenal world around us. It continues to this day with Quantum Physicists discovering smaller and smaller bits of matter. However, the truth about the nature of reality cannot be found in any of these packages. The more we search, the broader our questions become and we end up circling back to the same old dilemma: Who are we? What am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is my purpose? These questions are the source of humankind’s greatest sufferings.

Ask yourself, how would it benefit your life to know the answers to these questions? Would it change the way you live; pay your bills; what you eat; how you treat one another? The Buddha knew that there was no benefit to knowing the answer to these questions because regardless of the answers, everything is still impermanent!

What if your knowledge; your life; is no longer dependent on anything other than your immediate and direct experience? What if you simply lived the stream of your life like a beautiful musical score, simply directly experiencing the flow?

This is exactly what the Buddha taught. He said that knowledge, the ability to see the truth about the nature of all reality is not dependent on anything; just seeing; just understanding. There is no secret teaching—no mysteries. Truth is right here for everyone to see, and experience. Truth and Reality is all there is, and the knowledge of these. For those who do not see the distinction between these two, cannot comprehend the depth and

breadth encapsulated in the Buddha's teachings. Ignorance is not the inability to see, but is an action that one embarks upon, to ignore what reality is, in order to favor what we imagine or want to be real.

So then, it could be said that true liberation from suffering is not the result of a mere desire to be good or to do what is right, this just creates more suffering. No, it is the intention to become awake. That is the true liberation.

So, why are you here? What is your purpose? Why are you alive? All these questions can be answered with one phrase: "To become awakened." When this happens, then the other questions are automatically answered. "What happens after I die?"

In order to become awakened, our first responsibility is to see our own ignorance and understand that we are the source of our own confusion. In order to even begin to see our own ignorance, we must be willing to accept that there are two sorts of ignorance. There is blindness, and then there is self-deception.

Blind ignorance can be summed up by exactly what the Buddha meant by the Three Marks of Existence: We are ignorant of the basic realities of this existence: 1) Impermanence, 2) Dukkha (suffering), and 3) Egolessness (anatta/no-self). Ignorance caused by self-deception is when we refuse to believe or consider that the Three Marks of Existence are even true.

Ignorance caused by self-deception is most commonly brought about when we intellectualize what reality is. When we become stuck in concepts without understanding that our steadfast beliefs, opinions and so on, are the very bars on the prison cell we create for ourselves.

The influential Chinese Zen Master, Huangbo Xiyun, also known as Huangpo, who died around 850 C.E.²⁷, said:

"The ignorant eschew phenomena but not thought; the wise eschew thought but not phenomena."

In other words, it is with our own ignorance that we reject actual experience in favor of what we think. So, with regard to the self, we posit this self in our thoughts, and we conceptualize permanence where there isn't any.

Now that you know the Three Marks of Existence, what will you do? You now have a responsibility to free yourself from static frozen concepts that keep you imprisoned to suffering of all sorts.

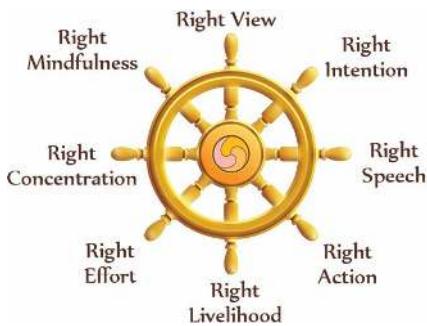
You are the stream of water particles floating in the air, with the sunlight passing through them to make a rainbow. We experience a rainbow as something solid, as something real, but it is not. A rainbow is an illusion of light passing through mist. Yet, there it is, in the sky, as real as real can be. The rainbow is annica and anatta. To ignore the experience and wish to possess the rainbow is dukkha. Yet, in the blink of an eye, the heat of

²⁷ Huangpo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huangbo_Xiyun

the sun dissipates the particles of water forming the mist, and the rainbow is no more. The rainbow has vanished. The rainbow is not real, but the experience is. Learn to experience the rainbow.

Liberation is in sight. Yes, you can see a part of it right now, this very moment.

The only thing stopping you from your own awakening is you. As I so often am fond of saying: "When would now be the right time to change this?"



Namō Tassa Bhagavatō Arahatō Sammā-Sambuddhassa

Namō Tassa Bhagavatō Arahatō Sammā-Sambuddhassa

Namō Tassa Bhagavatō Arahatō Sammā-Sambuddhassa

(Homage to the Triple Gems

Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Exalted One, the Fully Enlightened One)